

A CHRISTMAS
GIFT

T. W. HALL

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No. 7

A Christmas Gift

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The Ooze Leather Christmas Series

A Christmas Gift

BY
T. W. HALL



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A Christmas Gift

*A Tale of the Love of Tag 12 B of the
White Mountain Apaches*

I

THE arrival of Lieutenant Bob Roberts and his bride was something beyond the ordinary experience of the garrison at Fort Chiricahua. The four troops of the Twelfth United States Cavalry quartered in the rectangle of buildings named for the great war tribe of the Apaches were situated too far from the routes of civ-

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ilized travel to have much in common with the rest of the world. Life was an incessant round of duty for the preservation of the White Mountain tribe of Apaches, of guard duty for the preservation of themselves. Reveille woke them and taps sent them to bed. The buckboard and the mail came one day and departed the next. The newspapers came with regular irregularity. The paymaster appeared every other month with his shining gold and his oft repeated stories. Otherwise there was little or nothing to relieve the monotony of existence in the pretty mountain army post in Arizona.

As for brides, none had been seen in

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Chiricahua in centuries—at least, so the ladies of the garrison would have told you. There were not very many of these, but, such as they were, they were far in excess of the unmarried officers. Of these unmarried officers, but two were eligible. One of these, Bob Roberts, had deliberately gone back East on leave, and had married a girl he had been engaged to for so many years it shouldn't have counted for an engagement at all. The other was the chum and West Point classmate of the aforesaid Roberts, Lieutenant Ned Savage, but his case was quite hopeless. He was a confirmed bachelor.

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When the bride of Bob Roberts arrived late one November evening, the event threw Fort Chiricahua into a state of active eruption. Plans had been made for great festivities. Savage gave up his bachelor quarters for the reception of his chum "and family" of one slip of a girl. The ladies of the garrison put the place in order, much to the agitation of Savage, who had neglected to tear up all his letters. The men of the various troops, who each and all adored the bridegroom, decorated the little house with evergreens and streamers of bunting. The post band—a purely volunteer organization—learned a new piece. The

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band was a necessity. It played for the garrison hops. At these hops it usually had a better time than it kept. But all that was in the nature of things in the army before the Spanish War—in the old days when men were gray headed before they became captains.

Considering all this preparation, it was distinctly disagreeable of Roberts to make his appearance with his bride late at night. There were those mean enough to say that he purposely halted his ambulance ten miles out of post to wait for dark. He surely would, the elder ladies declared, if he had any sense and his bride were pretty enough to be worthy of the regimental family

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of the Twelfth. They had been brides themselves, and they knew from a long experience that a woman does not look her best after an eighty-mile ride in an ambulance.

So when Roberts and his wife arrived, the band played its new air; the colonel gave the well veiled bundle of femininity that hung timidly on Roberts' arm an official welcome and departed at once with his usual good sense; the ladies peered from their piazzas the whole length of the line; the men cheered with a will—and no one saw the newcomer that night save Savage, and he wouldn't tell.

The next morning Mrs. Roberts

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made her appearance. Actually, dressed in a tailor made gown of a fit that was a revelation to all Chiricahua, she stepped out on to the piazza of Savage's home, took a breath of the pure, bracing Arizona air, gave a glance at the multicolored rocks of the hills and canyons before her, and the forest clad mountains in the distance, and uttered a little exclamation of delight.

She was beautiful.

That was the unanimous verdict of Chiricahua, and every eye in the garrison was fastened upon her. Even the solitary prisoner in the guard house squinted through the iron bars of his

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cell at her and wished he had been good, and could go and get a nearer view. Even the young ladies admitted the fact, and wondered if her complexion was real or of the kind that is carried in a bag. Their elders remarked, "She's a thoroughbred," and went back to their coffee.

II

BUT there were eyes other than those rightfully belonging to the garrison that viewed the beauty of the bride and appreciated it profoundly. A young buck Apache, with a pair of moccasins for sale, was strolling up the gravel path in front of officers' row. He was walking with the usual slow, stealthy stride of his race, and appeared almost at the elbow of the young wife before she saw him.

An Indian was an unaccustomed sight to her. She gave a little shriek

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that brought her great, handsome husband promptly to her side. He had donned his uniform preparatory to reporting at orderly hour for duty. At sight of him the bride blushed and smiled at her own fright. Surely he, this wonderful "he" who was hers, was protection enough against all the Indians in the world.

The Apache noted the little shriek and was pleased thereat. She had seemed so beautiful that he had not dreamed such as he could have any effect upon her. To him the next best thing to inspiring love is the ability to inspire fear, and he smiled with quiet delight as he fastened his bright black

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eyes upon the vision of loveliness before him. Then he turned slowly to the east, raised his hand above his head with two fingers pointed to the sky, and slowly waved his forearm back and forth from north to south.

“What does he mean, dearest?” asked the little woman.

Roberts laughed.

“That’s sign language he’s using, sweetheart,” answered he. “He is saying that you are as beautiful as the morning.”

The Apache turned solemnly and looked at Roberts.

“Sicagi?” he asked, pointing to the bride.

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Roberts nodded his head affirmatively.

"He is asking if you are my sweetheart."

"Tell him 'yes,'" said the bride.

"I did," answered Roberts.

Laughingly the pair turned back into the evergreen decorated cottage as a bell announced breakfast. But the young buck stood long at the open doorway, gazing in. Finally a hand touched him on the shoulder. He turned and saw another officer standing by his side.

"Ugasha," said the officer almost fiercely. It was the Apache word for "go."

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For a moment the young buck hesitated. The two men, Apache and white, looked fiercely into each other's eyes. Then the Indian turned and walked away. The officer entered the cottage.

Young Mrs. Roberts had been in Uncle Sam's post at Chiricahua something less than twelve hours; and already two men other than her husband had been on the point of fighting because of her.

III

THE festivities in honor of the new bride proceeded in due order. There were lunches, dinners, dances, and private theatricals. Mrs. Bob Roberts was received into the arms of the Twelfth with honors befitting the occasion. When horseback rides were suggested, Ned Savage was now quite willing to go. He even engineered a rabbit hunt with an improvised pack of hounds. As one of the young ladies expressed it, he "suddenly came to life." Such was the effect

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of the advent of the pretty bride. Even the gray haired colonel, now twelve years a widower, threw away an old uniform that was the despair of the regiment, had his beard trimmed twice a week, and played the gallant to the young woman.

Nor did all this adulation turn the little woman's head. She was as sweet and simple, as unaffected, as she had been while a girl in her Eastern home. She liked everybody, and everybody liked her. Even the women failed to fan up sufficient jealousy to start a regimental quarrel.

It was only in the White Mountain Apache camp, down in the valley, that

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the members of her own sex waxed wroth at her. The brave young warrior, Nakitano, had become moon mad for love of the white squaw. He who was fleetest of foot, and surest of aim in his tribe, he who was its best hunter, he who feared neither the great bear of the hills nor the white soldiers' gun—that-is-carried-on-wheels, had become a moping solitary, responding not to the wiles or the smiles of the most bewitching maidens in the tribe. The old men of the village frowned, the young men sneered, and their sisters looked sullen.

One morning when Mrs. Roberts, now living in her own home, after re-

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turning Savage's cottage to him perfumed with the fragrance of her vanished self, went to her front door to water the flowers, she found on the door step a pair of tiny beaded moccasins. She ran with them to Bob.

"Look," she said, "I have had a present." Then she tried them on. They fitted like a glove.

"Why, whom do you suppose they are from?" she asked.

"From the Indian who thinks you as beautiful as the morning, of course," replied her husband.

"But how could he know my size?" she wondered.

"Measured the impression of your

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shoe somewhere. You would have to use your wings—which are sprouting daily—if you wished to keep an Indian from knowing the size of your feet.”

And then, for the first time, Mrs. Roberts became conscious of the attentions of the young buck she had met that first morning of her arrival. Indeed, when they walked to the front door, a moment or two later, there he was himself, standing patiently on the gravel walk with his customary pair of moccasins for sale. His eyes danced with delight when he saw his gift on the feet of the beautiful white woman. He pointed to himself first, then to the

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moccasins, then to her. Afterwards he pointed again to himself.

“Nakitano — Nakitano,” he repeated.

“He wants you to understand that his name is Nakitano, and that he gave them to you,” said Roberts.

“So that is his name,” she said musingly.

“His tribal name,” continued Roberts. Then the young lieutenant walked to the Apache and looked at the brass tag hanging from the latter’s waist.

“Officially,” continued Roberts, turning to his wife, “he is Pa-ce-nal-suce Na-ki-sa-ta, Half Circle B.”

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“Which means?” said she.

“Tag 12 B of the White Mountain Apaches.”

“Tag 12 B” considered the attention he was receiving from the young wife encouraging. There was not a day that he did not visit the fort to take a look at her, and sometimes he would remain hanging around her home for hours at a time. Not a week passed that he did not leave some present for her in the semi-mysterious manner that he had left the moccasins, slipping by the sentinels at night in order to place them at her door step.

One morning she found on her door step the bleeding claws of a grizzly
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bear, and almost fainted at the sight. She did not understand, but her husband did. So did Savage. The young Indian had slain the bear to show his prowess and had left the claws at her door to express his love. If she should string the claws into a necklace for him, he would know that his love was returned. The matter had gone quite far enough.

“Better let me warn him off,” said Savage.

“Isn’t that rather my business?” asked Roberts, with a smile.

“All right,” Savage replied. “But you know what these imps are. To anger him might mean—”

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“In that case it ought to be my funeral, not yours,” Roberts broke in. Then he laughed and slapped his chum on the back.

That day “Tag 12 B” was brought into the post by a guard, and officially warned to keep away from it in the future by Lieutenant Roberts, in the name of the commandant of the garrison.

When we heard the order, Nakitano gave one look of hatred at Roberts, slipped his hand into his shirt with the easy grace of a panther, drew forth a hunting knife, and silently, with one swift spring forward, drove it into the officer’s heart. Before the guard could

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gasp his astonishment, he, too, had received a gash in his firing arm, and Nakitano was flying towards the nearest foothills with the speed of a deer.

IV

FOUR years had passed over the garrison of Fort Chiricahua. The Twelfth was nearing the end of its turn at duty in Arizona. For months not a day had passed that the garrison, from colonel down to the rawest recruit, had not expected orders to move. Every one was anxious to go, except the civilian employees. Among these the one who was most affected at the prospect of a change was a clerk in the quartermaster's department. The clerk was Mrs. Roberts.

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The widow of the dead lieutenant had never left the post where her husband was buried. Her father had lost what little money he had, and she had found herself face to face with the world with but the small pension of a lieutenant's widow to support her and the little son who came into the world soon after his father's death. That was why the colonel, tender old man that he was, had found a place for her as clerk in the office of the post quartermaster. She had never moved from the first home that had been provided for her in the army. By common consent that house was hers. But the advent of a new garrison might change matters.

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She might even lose the position that had enabled her to live in moderate comfort among the only army friends she had.

In vain did the colonel try to assure her that he would so arrange things that she would be provided for by the new garrison. In vain did he promise that so soon as he could he would find her a place, if they did not. She went to bed weeping nearly every night of that long period of expectancy; and often, during her labors at her desk, the genial quartermaster saw her pretty lip curl as she stifled back a sob. In vain did Ned Savage try to cheer her up. He was a bungler at that sort of [32]

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work, and it usually ended by his accompanying her to the grave of her dead husband and standing awkwardly by while she had a good cry.

There was not a soul in the garrison who did not know that Ned loved her. By common consent it had been agreed that when she could sufficiently recover from the shock of her husband's death, Ned was the proper man to marry her. But that time did not seem to approach. Never before was woman so faithful to the memory of her first love. Ned knew this and spoke not. And the garrison and whole regiment understood the tender delicacy that forbade him to speak.

V

AS for Nakitano, they had chased him for weeks and months; but it had been impossible to capture him, even when aided by the angry members of his own tribe. He lived in the hills an outcast and an outlaw. But he did not go far away. The woods supplied him with all he wanted save ammunition and an occasional knife or cooking utensil. When he needed these he went quietly down among the tepees of his own people at night and stole them. Sometimes his camp fire

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could be seen far off in the mountains. At times it would be seen so near that a troop of cavalry would be ordered out in the middle of the night to attempt his capture. They never succeeded. When they arrived at his camp the ashes of his fire would be all that remained to tell of his presence, and, being on foot, he left little or no trail.

He even went so far as to make fires on purpose to draw out the men from the garrison. Eventually they gave up the attempt to capture him altogether. As the years passed the tribal hatred cooled, and in the course of time he gradually came into communication

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with his fellows. From occasional visitors of his tribe he learned of the birth of a son to the white woman in the fort. One night a sentinel fired at some moving object that failed to respond to his challenge. The guard turned out, as a matter of course, and a hunt was instituted; but it was unsuccessful. Perhaps Nakitano did see the boy.

If Ned Savage failed to win the place he sought in the heart of his friend's widow, he did not fail to win the affection of her son. To young Bob he was a father in everything that he could be. When the boy was a baby he wheeled him in a carriage. He taught him the delights of riding

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on an adult knee and of tearing out adult hair by the handful. He made him as many presents as he dared, and sang to him most inappropriate songs about "not going home till morning" and "filling the flowing bowl." Ned knew no others, and they pleased the boy.

When the boy appeared in short dresses and began to understand, in his beautiful, innocent, child way, something of the nature of things around him, Ned commenced his instruction in the art and science of language. Poor fellow, he blushed violently when, after three weeks' hard work to get the youngster to say "soldier," that young

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worthy looked up into his face and said “papa” with perfect distinctness.

Ned soon had the joy known only to fathers and foster fathers, of watching the little mind develop with the amazing rapidity that it does in even an ordinary child. He heard the first request of the boy to be lifted “way up to the sky.” Once, when young “Bob” was sick with a fever and just rallying back from the danger line, he called out in the impatient way of a sick child, “I want my papa”; and then it was that Ned, watching anxiously by the side of the boy’s small bed, had to pretend that he was the boy’s actual [38]

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“papa” before the woman he loved, before the boy’s mother.

Christmas was approaching, and the Twelfth had not yet moved. It was the first Christmas that young Bob could entirely comprehend, and Ned had made great preparations for his celebration of the event. He had sent to the East for toys picked out of an illustrated catalogue; and he spent much of his time telling the boy about Santa Claus, his workshop far away over the snow, and his wonderful team of reindeer that skip around from one house to another all over the world in a single night. It pleased him to see the wide open, wondering eyes of the boy

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as he listened. It would please him, he knew, to see those eyes open still wider when he saw the presents themselves.

"I want to send my papa a present," the boy said suddenly one day.

"Well," said Ned, hard pushed for means of expressage, "I suppose that can be done by sending it to Santa Claus marked 'For Papa.' "

"Where is Santa Claus?"

"Away out over the snow," Ned answered, unconsciously waving his arm in the direction of the snow clad hills.

"What do you want to send him?"

"My bestest toy," said the boy.

"Well, bring it here and we'll wrap

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it up and mark it; and to-morrow night I'll take it to Santa Claus. The next night, you know, is Christmas Eve, when Santa Claus delivers all the presents, and I'll get it to him just in time."

The boy rose promptly, went to another room, and brought forth his "bestest toy." Ned could have jumped for joy. The "bestest toy" was an extremely crude hook and ladder truck which Ned had made with his wonderful knife from several priceless shingles. It was duly wrapped up and marked "For Papa," and put away to be called for on the following evening.

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On the following evening Savage forgot the package and did not notice the disappointed, inquiring eyes of the boy. Something more important was on his mind. Orders had come that day for the Twelfth to prepare to move early in the coming month, and Savage had made up his mind that the time had come for him to ask the one great question upon which his future life would hinge. But he could not ask it. Bob Roberts' widow was on the point of tears again at the thought of the coming separation and the difficulties it might mean for her. All he could do was to cheer her up as best he could; and when he left her that night

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two little disappointed eyes saw him leave the house without asking for the package marked "For Papa."

That night a very small boy, who had just learned to put on his own clothes, accomplished the feat alone and unaided, though his eyes were blinded with tears and his little mouth set hard.

VI

EARLY the next morning the startling discovery was made that little Bob Roberts was missing from his home. The tracks of his little feet could be seen in the light carpet of snow, bearing off to the woods; but these could be followed only a short distance. Snow was again falling, and the tracks were soon obliterated.

A party of volunteers, under the leadership of Ned Savage, started to hunt for the boy as soon as his disappearance was discovered. He alone
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had an inkling as to the boy's idea of going out into the night. With pain he remembered the package marked "For Papa," which he had entirely forgotten the night before, and a rapid search revealed the fact of its absence. Then Savage knew that the boy had started with it to find Santa Claus "off in the snow." He realized instantly that his own fault had put the boy's life in danger. The hills were full of bears and wolves, driven by hunger down from the mountains. Nakitano, too, was there somewhere.

When word came that the volunteers had lost even the track of the boy's tiny feet owing to the new fall of

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snow, the colonel had “boots and saddles” sounded, and sent out every cavalryman in the post on a systematic hunt. After that he offered a reward for the recovery of the boy large enough to send every Indian on the reservation hot into the hills on a hunt on his own account. But the day passed with no tidings from the searchers. The afternoon wore on, and still no tidings. Women wept and men dared not look each other in the face. Hunger alone would have worn the little fellow out by that time, and after that—

It was a bitterly sad Christmas Eve at Fort Chiricahua. As night fell the
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searchers began to return, worn out themselves with fatigue and hunger. It was late at night when the last returned—and that last was Savage. He was worn out, haggard and weak. Long through the night he sat with the wife of his dead chum, waiting the dawn. Suddenly there was a peculiar, gnawing sound at the door. Savage recognized it instantly. An Indian was scraping his finger nail across the wood—the tribal method of knocking.

Savage bounded from his chair and dashed to the door. He opened it with a jerk that nearly tore it from its hinges, and there on the step lay the form of the lost boy, soundly sleeping,

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snugly wrapped in an old red blanket. It was an Indian blanket, but no Indian was in sight to claim the reward. And that was more than passing strange.

A moment later, and young Bob, sleeping smiling, was in the arms of his frenzied mother, hysterical with delight.

"Bob saw Santa Claus," said he pleasantly. "He Indian—like others —lives all alone, 'way off in snow." And then he fell asleep again on his mother's breast.

Savage bent over them a moment later. His hand caught a small brass tag in the shape of a half circle that
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had been hung about the boy's neck.
On it was stamped "12 B."

But Nakitano had brought back a still more valuable gift than the little wanderer that Christmas morning. He had brought realization to the quiet eyed mother. And so it happened that, for the second time, she went into quarters with the Twelfth United States cavalry a bride.

THE END



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